

**Testimony in Support of
S.B. 948, An Act Addressing Education Funding and Racial Equity in Connecticut**

Lisa Hammersley, Executive Director
School and State Finance Project

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of S.B. 948, An Act Addressing Education Funding and Racial Equity in Connecticut, and a special thank you to Representative Currey, Representative McGee, Representative Rojas, members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, and the many other legislators, town leaders, superintendents, and community members who have voiced their strong support for this proposal.

I am testifying in support of S.B. 948 because while positive steps have been taken by the General Assembly over the past few years to improve how Connecticut funds K-12 public education, our state's education finance system sadly remains inequitable, disjointed, and inadequate for addressing the systemic racial disparities and wide funding gaps our students, our teachers, our school districts, and our communities face every single day.

Last fall, our organization conducted an analysis that found a \$639 million funding gap in Connecticut between districts serving majority White student populations and all other districts. This is an unacceptable yet sadly unsurprising finding. It is a gap that has been exacerbated, and become all the more visible, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on public education and its disproportionate impacts on communities of color.

This funding gap is the result of an education finance system that is in dire need of a fix and an investment. S.B. 948 helps provide both of those by creating a truly student-centered funding system that provides equitable funding for all students.

S.B. 948 significantly strengthens and improves the current Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula while keeping intact the formula's overall structure that was overwhelmingly approved on a bipartisan basis in 2017. The bill builds upon the existing formula by:

- Increasing and expanding the formula's weights for English Learners and students in districts with concentrated poverty;
- Eliminating the formula's phase-in schedule and fully funding districts beginning in FY 2022;

- Mitigating the volatility in student enrollment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by using the greater of October 2019 or October 2020 student data for FY 2022 grants; and
- Expanding the formula to include all Connecticut public school students.

Taking these steps would reduce Connecticut's racial funding gap by 68 percent (\$437 million); invest nearly \$445 million more in K-12 public education, including \$340 million more for local and regional public schools; increase the fully-funded grant amount for 99 percent of school districts; and help ensure all public school students receive the equitable funding they need to succeed in and outside of the classroom.

Fully Funds Districts NOW

Additionally, S.B. 948 would provide an immediate infusion of state funding for Connecticut's neediest students and communities by fully funding the formula NOW. This means a second grader will not have to wait until they are going into high school to receive the resources the General Assembly has already determined they need for an enriching, high-quality educational experience. At the same time, though, S.B. 948 maintains the formula's phase-out schedule so districts experiencing declines in funding do not see their full reduction in funding immediately — allowing town and district budgets to continue to absorb the reduction over time.

Responds to Growing Student Needs

S.B. 948 also makes the ECS formula more responsive to the changing needs of Connecticut's students and districts. In the last 10 years, Connecticut's English Learner population has grown by nearly 13,000 students, while the state's total enrollment has decreased by nearly 37,000 students. S.B. 948 responds to these growing needs by increasing the formula's English Learner weight from 15 percent to 25 percent to drive greater funding to districts for equitable learning opportunities for English Learners.

This bill also increases the formula's concentrated poverty weight from five percent to 15 percent to provide greater funding for economically disadvantaged students attending school districts with concentrated poverty, and reduces the threshold for a district to qualify for the weight from 75 percent to 60 percent. Currently, only four districts are eligible for the weight while many of Connecticut's largest and highest-need districts are excluded, including Bridgeport, New Britain, and New Haven. By lowering the weight's threshold, S.B. 948 drives much-needed resources to the state's highest-need communities.

Provides Equitable Funding for All & Improves Transparency

Lastly, S.B. 948 finally eliminates the tangled web of inequitable grants and formulas currently used to support other types of public schools by creating one statewide, equitable education finance formula. S.B. 948 creates a system where all public school students are funded based on their learning needs. A system with greater transparency and improved predictability for districts. A system that finally provides the equitable funding that students, parents, and teachers across the state have been for years pleading for.

S.B. 948 is a straightforward yet comprehensive approach to education funding that helps address Connecticut's educational inequities, fix the state's current complex and disjointed way of funding public schools, and make significant strides in reducing the alarming funding disparities that currently exist between the state's students of color and White students.

I ask Committee members to support S.B. 948 and its creation of a student-centered funding system that will finally deliver equitable education funding for all of Connecticut's students.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony in strong support of S.B. 948, and please feel free to reach out to me via the contact information below should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Lisa Hammersley
Executive Director
School and State Finance Project
lisa.hammersley@schoolstatefinance.org

About the School and State Finance Project

Founded in 2015, the School and State Finance Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy organization, focused on education funding and state finance issues, with a commitment to providing independent analysis, building public knowledge, improving transparency, and developing fair, sustainable solutions.

The organization strives to serve as a trusted, independent source of accurate data, information, and research, and is focused on:

- Increasing awareness and building public knowledge about Connecticut's education finance system, state budget, and overall fiscal health;
- Improving transparency around Connecticut's education and state finances;
- Working collaboratively to develop thoughtful, data-driven solutions that address Connecticut's education funding and state finance challenges; and
- Providing technical assistance to partner organizations seeking to solve education finance-related challenges.

For more information about the School and State Finance Project, visit www.schoolstatefinance.org.